

In any food service establishment, the greatest assets can also be the biggest food safety risks—the employees.

A food worker that comes to work when he or she is ill is one of the most common causes of foodborne illnesses spread to customers. Before you go to work while you are ill (or demand that a sick employee report for duty), read this brochure and understand the risks to your job, your business, your customers and your finances if you are linked to illnesses spread through food.

**Food workers often determine the safety of the customers they serve.**

### It's all in the hands...

Most foodborne illnesses from a sick food worker are spread by the hands. Usually, the infected worker uses the restroom or picks at a skin infection, doesn't wash



the hands carefully, and accidentally spreads germs to the food.

When people are sick, the germs (bacteria, viruses, or parasites) that made them sick are in their bodies or on their skin and can be spread to others through foods they touch before, during, or after symptoms of illness appear.

If the food is in your home, your family members might become ill; if the food is your business, you may be held financially responsible for your customers that become ill.

**Every food worker either causes or prevents food safety problems.**

### How costly can an ill foodworker be?

In 2000, an eastern Washington restaurant reportedly paid for hepatitis A immune globulin shots for about 1,400 people (as well as \$200 compensation each) because they ate at the restaurant near the time an employee with the virus had handled vegetables. The restaurant also paid four settlements ranging from \$25,000 to \$75,000 for those people with hepatitis A that possibly contracted the virus from the restaurant.

### Is it enough to keep workers that are obviously ill from working with food?

Unfortunately, no. Excluding sick food workers should be only a *portion* of your 3-step plan to reduce foodborne illnesses spread in your restaurant. Don't forget to practice your 2 other prevention methods—Handwashing and Preventing Bare Hand Contact with ready-to-eat foods.

Here are three reasons that excluding sick food workers does not always work:

#### Carrier-state

People that are ill and able to spread the illness, but show no symptoms, are called “carriers.” An infamous carrier in food service is “Typhoid Mary.” A cook in New York in the early 1900's, Mary Mallon is known to have spread typhoid fever to over 50 people, killing 3. (She has been linked, however, to over 200 illnesses and 50 deaths.) Mary was a carrier of the illness and did not show symptoms. [Typhoid fever is caused by a strain of *Salmonella* and is spread fecal-oral. Today, the majority of cases occur outside of the United States, and the death rate is between 10%-30% of people infected.]

#### Asymptomatic incubation

Many illnesses are able to be transmitted (spread to others) during the incubation period. [The incubation period is the time from getting infected until symptoms are first noticed.] An example is hepatitis A. The virus is generally at its highest concentration in the feces about 2 weeks *before* symptoms occur.

#### Varied immune system levels

A classic symptom of foodborne illness is diarrhea—one of your immune system's ways to remove invading germs from your body. Germs that cause minimal diarrhea in some (and so the employee doesn't think it necessary to stay home) may cause severe illness in other people with lower levels of immune protection. As an example, people with AIDS are about 300 times more likely to have severe cases of listeriosis than people with healthy immune systems who will probably only get mild symptoms.

### Why is this so important?

Employee health and hygiene demand priority, because:

#### ...we all have germs

We all have germs that can be on our skin and scalp, in our noses, mouths, acne, cuts and intestines. These germs come out when we scratch our skin, blow or pick our nose, cough, sneeze, pick at cuts or acne and go to the bathroom. Most of our germs are not harmful, but some may cause disease. For a few of us, the germs might just cause a little bit of nuisance diarrhea; for others, the germs can cause severe illness, life-long complications or even death.

#### ...your health is important

Maintaining regular and appropriate hygiene and handwashing will not only help protect your customers, it will also improve your personal health and finances (fewer medications, doctor visits, unpaid sick days).

#### ...this is your profession

We expect a lot from our professionals. Doctors are expected to help keep us from getting ill or making us well again; lawyers are supposed to keep us from getting into trouble or get us out of it; health inspectors try to reduce public exposure to things that can cause injury and illness. These professions have standards, codes and ethics that they follow. Likewise, following the standards, codes and ethics of foodservice, you will meet the expectations of your profession (and likely reduce your experience with doctors, lawyers, and health inspectors).

#### ...it is the law

Until the early 20th century, contaminated food and water caused many foodborne illnesses (including botulism, diphtheria, and tuberculosis) in the U.S. In 1906, food safety legislation began with the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Today, in Washington State, retail food service is required to follow the Washington Administrative Code 246-215: Rules and Regulations of the State Board of Health for Food Service. These regulations for employee hygiene and other food safety issues are based on food safety science and are enforced by local health departments.

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*To help reduce all foodborne illnesses: Always use foods and water from approved sources, clean and sanitize surfaces and equipment, obey food safety temps, and PROHIBIT bare hand contact with foods.*

## What to do when...

### ...A possible foodborne illness is reported to an employee

When a possible foodborne illness is reported to any food service employee, the person in charge shall:

1. **Immediately report** the incident to the local health department.
2. **Remove from sale** and refrigerate any available suspect food.
3. **Instruct the complainant** to report the incident to the health department.

### ...A sick employee reports for work

Food service establishments are required to have an employee illness policy. This illness policy must prevent ill foodworkers from working with food or food contact surfaces. If an employee has symptoms including:

- **vomiting or diarrhea**
- **sore throat with a fever**
- **a boil or infected cut**

the food worker must NOT work with food or food-contact surfaces (including dishes). To protect your other employees, it is best to require that the ill foodworker stay away from your establishment.

### ...An employee has a diagnosed illness

Many infections are not carried through food (including HIV, Hepatitis B or C, ringworm) and should not prevent the infected foodworker from working. *Many infections that are not spread through food can be spread through other contact—practice universal precautions at work.*

Illnesses that do spread through food include:

- Hepatitis A\*
- *E. coli* O157:H7\*
- Shigellosis\*
- Typhoid fever\*

\*Employees with these illnesses are NOT permitted to work with food. These illnesses are “notifiable”—you must notify the health department if you have them or think an employee does.

Note to the Foodservice Manager: According to WAC 246-101-410 (Legal Requirements for Notifiable Conditions--Responsibilities of Food Service Establishments) you are not to release information about the communicable illnesses of employees with other employees or the general public.

## Other measures that will help prevent food contamination.

- Always use barriers (utensils or gloves) when preparing or handling ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after going to the bathroom, smoking or eating.
- Avoid touching or scratching your mouth, nose, hair, clothes and skin.
- Cover up coughs and sneezes with a tissue and wash your hands.
- Keep yourself clean: bathe or shower regularly and wash your hands often.
- Wear clean work clothing.
- Restrain hair and limit jewelry.

Proper handwashing involves the following steps:

- **Get** the paper towel ready
- **Wet** hands with warm water
- Use liquid or powdered **soap**
- **Scrub** hands, including fingernails, thoroughly with soapy lather for **at least 15 seconds**
- **Rinse** hands with warm, running water for at least 15 seconds
- **Dry** hands with a paper towel

## For More Information:

### Benton-Franklin Health District

Environmental Health Division  
800 W. Canal Dr.

Kennewick, WA 99336

(509) 582-7761 ext. 246 [www.bfhd.wa.gov](http://www.bfhd.wa.gov)

**Washington Administrative Code 246-215:** Rules and Regulations of the State Board of Health for Food Service  
[www.mrsc.org](http://www.mrsc.org) (or a copy will be provided at your request)

### Food & Drug Administration Food Code

[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodcode.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodcode.html)

### Notifiable Illnesses in Washington State

[www.doh.wa.gov/notify](http://www.doh.wa.gov/notify)

# The Ill Foodworker

public food service series



[www.bfhd.wa.gov](http://www.bfhd.wa.gov)

